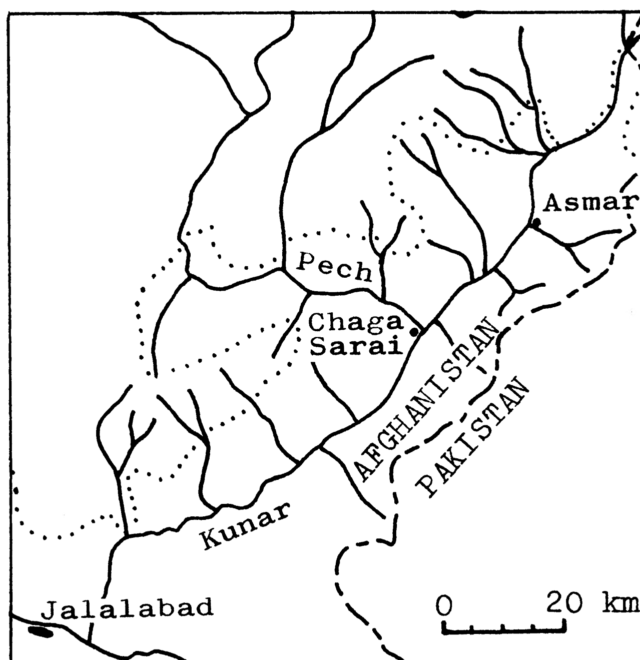


The dotted line separates the Pashtu-speaking area on the one hand and the Dardic and Nuristani speaking areas on the other. The Pashtuns are living east and south of the dividing line. (Based on map in R. Strand: Notes on the Nuristani and Dardic languages. Jour. of the Am. Oriental Society, vol. 93, no. 3, 1973).



Women and Honour

The relationship between the sexes, and the »status« of women in relation to men, implies that women are regarded as inferior to men and as such liable to their control. The Pashtuns' system of social norms based on their code of *honour and shame* is reinforced by Islam in their view of women as social minors and dependants – in fact a Pashtun proverb goes to the effect that

»women are but half-worth human beings«. Women are regarded as the personal property of the men, and their chastity and »good behaviour« according to the Pashtun norms constitute a vital element in a man's honour and his image as a »true Pashtun«.

In some respects, however, it seems that *Islam* keeps the woman in higher esteem than the Pashtun norms. In cases where the two codes disagree it seems that Islam has to give way. This occurs e.g. in three important respects, namely marriage and divorce, inheritance, and participation in public religious life.

1. Marriage and Divorce

According to the Koran women have a formal right to accept or refuse a marriage. Moreover, women are entitled to a special marriage-payment, *Mahr,* which also implies the obligation of the husband to pay a certain amount of money or to cede a certain piece of land to the wife in the case of divorce; this could be termed a sort of »divorce insurance«. This should be seen in the light of the man's easy access to divorce according to Islamic law, which in many cases makes women's life extremely unsecure. However, according to Islamic law even women can under certain circumstances divorce their husbands. – Among the Pashtuns in Kunar women possess, de facto, neither the right to accept or refuse marriage, nor the right of *Mahr* (even if it may be formally written into the marriage contract), nor the right of divorce. However, in fact divorce is virtually non-existent, since it would greatly shame the woman's family and possibly provoke a retaliation act. Incidentally, this non-existence of divorce is actually in the favour of the women who do not have to live with the same insecurity as women in groups where divorce is easily (and often rashly) made. However, they still face the possibility of their husband's taking another wife if he becomes dissatisfied with the marriage.

2. Inheritance and Control of Property

According to the Koran women are entitled to own land and movable and immovable property; the above-mentioned *Mahr* e.g., should legally belong to the bride herself and not to her father (something which is rarely observed, however, in most Muslim countries outside the cities). Moreover, she is entitled to inherit half the share of a brother, i.e. a sister and a brother share (approx.) an inheritance in the proportion of 1:2. Neither of these injunctions are observed by the Pashtuns; women never inherit land.

3. Women's Right to Participate in the Public Religious Life

According to the Koran woman is entitled to participate in the prayer in the mosque, to study the Koran, and to go on a pilgrimage. Among the Pash-

tuns women pray at home, and, to my knowledge, do not go on pilgrimage.

The last point is in particular the effect of the Pashtuns' (male) view of women as socially incomplete, not to say irresponsible beings, the objects of male control. The control of women is maintained symbolically through the *Purdah* system, a set of norms regarding women's behaviour based on the idea that women should be isolated from men outside the closest family group – their faces should be hidden, as it is literally expressed in Pashtu *(makh potawöl* = to hide the face[3]). This is effected by segregating the sexes, keeping the women hidden from view in the houses and compounds *(kala)* or through *veiling*. Veiling is often described as a »symbolic shelter« in anthropological literature[4] but, while it may be perceived as a device for sheltering the vulnerable women from male aggression, it may just as well be interpreted as »sheltering« her husband's vested sexual interests in her from being jeopardized through the woman's own sexual aggressiveness or initiative towards other men. There are strong indications in the Pashtun culture that the latter is the case – as we shall see.

It is essential to Pashtun men to control women in order to be able to arrange marriages according to their interests, either within the kin group or with the purpose of establishing some useful political alliance outside the close group.

The most valuable aspect of women in the eyes of men is their capacity of producing children – particularly sons,[5] future heirs and labour power, and, most important of all, defenders of the family property. (This son-complex is so widespread in Middle Eastern tribal societies that a proverb is found among the Rif Kabyles of North Africa: »The land is copper, but the arms (of the defenders) are silver.«[6]

In the Pashtun society of Kunar, too, sons are considered crucial assets in the establishment of a political grouping. One informant, a rich *khan* (landowner) with many sons, expressed it like this: »We don't care if our sons wear trousers and sandals, or whether they go barefeet. What is of interest to us is maintaining our influence, and we do that by having many sons.«

The »son-producing ethos« is closely connected with the pre-marital virginity and post-marital fidelity of women in order to protect and maintain the family honour – and this is ensured through the *Purdah*-system and the extremely severe sanctions against violations of the norms: a husband has a right (in fact a moral obligation) to kill his wife if she is found guilty of adultery, thus redressing his honour – and he is bound to do it even to-day, according to our experience.

From their childhood women are socialized into the *Purdah* norm-system. Young girls grow up with the notion that it is »shameful« *(sharm)* to be seen by men outside the family. They try in all situations and in whatever possible way to keep *Purdah.*

However, this can only be done insofar as it can be combined with the women's economic and social situation and functions. In this way actual *Purdah* obviously means varying degrees of limitations of the woman's freedom of movement, dependent on which social group she belongs to. Of course the most important difference in the practising of *Purdah* depends on whether the woman belongs to a group or class where her work outside the home is economically necessary, that is primarily to a tenant- or smallholder- (owner-operator-) family.

Throughout Afghanistan it is a symbol of high social prestige to be able to keep the women of the family within the home. In the countryside this is mainly the privilege of the landowners, the *khans,* and other economically independent groups even in the cases where the realisation of *Purdah* means a straightforward economic loss to the family. Thus there is clearly a direct connection between class-membership and the way in which *Purdah* is practised.

In the Kunar region *veiling* consists of a shawl, *saruka* (local dialect for head-cloth, sar = head) – covering head and shoulders. This is worn by all women. Little girls start wearing it at about 7 years, when the Koranic school begins, and they are entering the Moslem community; many start earlier because they are proud to wear the *saruka* like a grown-up woman. Besides the *saruka,* the women who can afford it may wear a *chaderi* (the all-cover, sack-like veil) when leaving the house or the village. However, the *chaderi* is essentially an urban phenomenon and has to be bought at considerable cost (400-500 afghanis) in Jalalabad (the nearest provincial city, center of the Nangahar province). The *chaderi* is thus mostly worn by women of land-owning families. – Both *chaderi* and *saruka* are worn in different ways and manipulated expertly according to the demands of the situation.

Of course the *division of labour* is also subject to the segregation of sexes, and *Purdah.* The women's sphere of activity is the home, and in the cases where the family can afford it, her work is confined within the walls of the *kala.* In poorer families, tenants and small peasants, this is not possible. Here women participate in the agricultural work, helping in the field by weeding and assisting in the harvesting; she also goes out to fetch water and firewood for the household. If she is the wife of a tenant, she often has to go to the land-owner's house and help out with the household chores. This is part of the system of *corvée* labour in Eastern Afghanistan, forced unpaid labour from the tenant to the khans, which is called *begar.* The women's *begar* is particularly unpopular, because it prevents the men of the tenant class from keeping full control of »their« women. In cases where proper observation of *Purdah* is difficult, *Purdah* is manifested through *avoidance.*

The Life and Work of the Women

When a baby girl is born, the general attitude is that she is nice but what a pity it wasn't a boy! No guns are fired, as when a boy is born. But in most cases, especially when the mother already has some sons, the girl is loved and pampered as an infant just like a boy. There is even a tendency of suckling the baby girl for a longer period, »she is bound to leave the family and needs more mother's milk to support her in the strange family.«

As the girl grows up she is informally socialized by the women of the household into her future role as wife, mother and »*Purdah*-woman«. She helps with easy tasks but has considerable freedom to play. Maybe she starts school at about 7, mostly to learn the Koran plus some basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. – As for schooling, relatively much fewer girls than boys enter the local village schools, and only if there happens to be a girls' school. Only very few daughters from the wealthier *khan*-families are allowed to continue school until completion (12 classes).

At puberty (12-14 years) she is considered marriageable, and has to observe full *Purdah*. Now she will be fully competent in all female tasks, and often she has already started to prepare her dowry, e.g. made embroidered handkerchiefs for presents to the bridegroom's male relatives, bedspreads, and tablecloths.

A woman's work mainly consists of bread-making (bread is made once or even twice a day), cooking and making youghurt, cleaning rice, wheat, and corn for cooking, tending the children, sweeping, washing, making clothes, and feeding the animals that may be mostly chickens, a sheep or a goat, sometimes a cow or two, or in wealthy households a water-buffalo which is kept for the milk.

Marriages are negotiated between the male elders of the families. We were told that formerly it was customary for a family to announce its wish to have a certain girl for a daughter-in-law by sending the boy's mother on a social visit to the family of the girl. After entertainment, during which no mention of marriage was made, the elder woman would manage to make a small tear in the dress of the desired girl. Then the message was clear.

In the Kunar region marriages are usually arranged within the family group. It is considered desirable that a girl marries her cousin. The actual frequency of cousin-marriage really was rather high.[7] However, in cases where it is considered advantageous for the family to establish alliances outside the family, a marriage will be arranged accordingly. In many cases a marriage match is established between more distant branches of a family (e.g. second cousins) in order to create an alliance that may be of support in the (frequent) cases where close agnatic relatives (e.g. the sons of two brothers) quarrel and conflict over land.[8]

In connection with marriage a bride-price *(walwar)* is paid to the bride's



Fig. 1. A Pashtun woman cooking

father. In Kunar it amounts to between 20000 and 50000 afghanis.[9] The bride is provided with a dowry which consists of clothing, bedding, household utensils, a lantern, and maybe an Indian Singer sewing-machine or even a transistor radio if the family is wealthy. Part of the dowry may be paid out of the bride-price money.

The wedding itself is often a big affair with many guests who are all fed in the house of the bridegroom's family. – Interestingly enough we noticed that the female guests, who were allowed inside the house, were much better fed, with big chunks of good-quality meat and small fried cakes called *ronsakhri,* than were the male guests outside on the verandah or in the guest-house *(hujra).* The women also dance, while the men rarely do so. The bride cries the whole wedding day for having to leave her parental home and live in another house where she is often met with latent suspiciousness or hostility. – The young couple are allowed to see each other's faces on the wedding-night. A mirror is held in the lap of the bride and she lets reluctantly her face be seen in it while the bridegroom lifts her veil a little. Then the marriage contract is signed (the *khat-nikah)* and the marriage is completed – provided that the bride proves to be a virgin. Otherwise she may be killed by her brothers.

Mother-in-law

After the wedding the bride moves into the home of the bridegroom (patrilocal or virilocal marriage) and here she is surrounded by his sisters and the wives of his brothers. She is now subject to the authority of her mother-in-law. In fact the mother-in-law *(kwakhe)* is a figure in the social set-up (but not necessarily as an individual person) who is the object of fear and antagonism from the daughters-in-law.

The relations within the group of women in an extended family is often characterized by latent antagonisms and jealousy. In spite of this the atmosphere may well be extremely pleasant and relaxed. The underlying conflicts only break out in the open in situations of crisis. – This also holds true for co-wives in a polygamous household, which is fairly common among the landowners (who may have two or at most three wives at a time). Jealousy always exists between co-wives, but they may well be on good terms and help each other in the daily life. The rivalry manifests itself most clearly in the case where the husband openly prefers one wife and neglects the other and her children – something that occurs quite often.

Jealousy and rivalry between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law is centered around two »assets«: the economic resources of the joint enterprise, the household; and above all, the *man* as a source of love and support. The ties of attachment and loyalty are generally closer between a man and his mother and sisters, than between him and his new wife. This is not surprising in view of the strict segregation of sexes, where a young man is prevented from social intercourse with young girls outside the close family circle, and in view of the marriage system where the *young* man does not choose his bride himself, except in rare cases, when he manages to persuade his father to comply to his wishes. Usually the young bride does not get a proper foothold in the household, and a hold on her husband, until she has born him a son. Gradually her position becomes more secure, and she gets more authority, until the day when her own son gets married and she herself becomes a mother-in-law.

When a woman grows old and maybe becomes a widow, her sons are even more important to her: she lives in their household and is provided for by them. If she has no sons, she has to end her days on charity from relatives and people in the village.

Such are, briefly sketched, the outlines of Pashtun women's life. Their conditions are ultimately set by men, structurally through the men's control of the property and thus the vital means of existence, and ideologically by means of the *Purdah* institution that is closely related to the basic Pashtun value system of honour. Through these means the men hope to control the women's bodies and minds. But do they succeed?



Fig. 2. Pashtun women dancing at a wedding

Honour and Love

To what extent do women comply and co-operate with the men of their family in keeping up the family honour through chastity or marital fidelity? And *if* they break the rules, does that also mean that they negate the Pashtun code of honour as such? In other words: if women revolt against the men's control of their bodies, and use their bodies as they wish in extra-marital love affairs, do they revolt against their personal situation, as individuals, or against the whole male-dominated structure as well?

Women *do* revolt against the men's control. That is a fact, even if somewhat astonishing in view of the extremely severe sanctions in the case of discovery of extra-marital love-affairs. On the one hand I was told of frequent love-affairs, and on the other hand several affairs were discovered, with ensuing dramas, during our stay. – The women's minds, too, are not easily controlled, which is seen from the popularity of women songs, special *landais* that are only sung among women and express romantic feelings of love, sensual pleasure, courage, and defiance against the men. The (although perhaps somewhat idealized) picture we get from the women's *landais* is that of a »contestant« woman[10] and they may explicitly provoke the rules of the system, as in this *landai:*

> »Isn't there a single daring man in this village?
> »My flame-coloured pants are burning my thighs.«[11]

One *landai* of my own material illustrated the popularity of the watering-place, the spring or the river-bank, as a meeting-point for secret lovers (the women often go to fetch water after dusk, in order not to be seen – a fact which they can also take advantage of!):

»If you really love me you should hire the place along the stream *(godar)* where the young girls sit
»When they go to fetch water.«

The women appear to exhibit solidarity in not telling on each other to the men. However problems do occur if a woman tries to seduce another woman's husband.

The women's *landais* show an attitude of not just meekly accepting the fate that the family has decided on. It happens quite often that a young girl gets married to a man of 40-50 years of age, and then he has to look well after her, not staying away too much or sleeping too heavily in the night! Many *landais* tell how the woman scorns her husband, »the Little Awful One«[12]:

»My beloved, hurry up and come to me!
»The Little Awful One is asleep
»And you can embrace me.«[13]

The *landais* express a sensual joy of physical love and a will to enjoy life in spite of all – death is a possibility that is always present. On the other hand, they can also show a merciless contempt and rejection of a man *as a lover* who does not live up to the Pashtun norms of honour in respect of courage in war. Such a lover does not stand a chance:

»Let them carry you back to me cut to pieces by swords
»Only they never bring me news of your shame.«
Or
»My beloved! if you turn your back on the enemy
»Never return! your place is no longer in this house
»Go! and seek your refuge in a country far away.«[14]

As the last two *landais* clearly illustrate, the cause of honour and virility prevail over soft and tender feelings – even in the illicit love that has already through its very existence broken the rules. The »revolt« of women does not challenge the Pashtun social code of honour as such but is the individual's personal revolt against a system which denies her the right of disposing of her own body and choosing her own fate. The ultimate weapon of women in this context is choosing their own death – suicide actually occurs quite often in cases where the woman is very unhappily married, or is afraid of being detected as an adulteress.

The Pashtun women do not question the code of honour that is the very foundation of Pashtun ideology. On the contrary they share it, they are proud of being Pashtun women – *Pukhtanē*. But they do question and

CONTENTS

FOLK VOL. 21-22 1979/80

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challenge the basis of the equation male honour/male control of women – and in so doing they are able to turn the code of honour back upon the individual men themselves.

NOTES

1. The material of this article was mostly collected during the author's fieldwork, together with her husband, mag. scient. Asger Christensen, 1977 – 1978 in the Kunar valley region, Kunarha province, Eastern Afghanistan neighbouring Pakistan. The stay was sponsored by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities.
2. Cf. Erika Knabe »Frauenemanzipation in Afghanistan«, Afghanische Studien Band 16, 1977.
3. For transcription I have conferred with *Bellew: A Dictionary of the Pukkhto or Pukshto Language,* London 1867. The dialect spoken in the Kunar region is the Eastern Pashtu, i.e. »Pukkhto«, in which »kh«-sounds are pronounced as in German »ach«.
4. Cf. Hannah Papanek: *»Purdah in Pakistan: Seclusion and Modern Occupations for Women.«* In: Journal of Marriage and the Family, vol. 33, no. 3, 1971.
5. The kinship »system« of the Pashtuns is the so-called *patrilineal* system, where descent is at least ideally traced exclusively through male members of the family. Thus sons are crucial to the continuation of a man's bloodline. In Afghanistan children are considered as belonging to the husband/father, in case of divorce a woman has to leave her children with him.
6. *P. Bourdieu: »Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique«. Chapter III: »La parenté comme Répresentation et comme Volonté.«* P. 120. Geneve 1972.
7. However, we have at this stage of analysing our material not yet been able to make out any statistical figures or trends.
8. A Pashtu proverb says that the »tarbur« (agnatic cousin) is your born enemy – and this should be seen in the light of these conflicts over land which may easily turn into blood-feuds.
9. In 1978 1 dollar = approx. 35 afs. (variable according to circumstances).

10.-14. Dr. Sayd B. Majrouh of Kabul University has written a very interesting paper on women's landais which he has collected in his natal region in Kunar. The following notes all refer to this article (notes 11, 12, 13 and 14): *»LA FEMME CONTESTATAIRE«, Un certain visage de la femme Pashtoune dans la poésie populaire de la langue Pashto.* Pasto Quarterly, Vol. 1, No 1, 1977, Kabul.

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Women, Honour and Love.
Som aspects of the Pashtun woman's life in Eastern Afghanistan

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Women, Honour and Love

Some aspects of the Pashtun woman's life in Eastern Afghanistan

By *Inger W. Boesen*

Generally it can be said that life in the Kunar valley of Eastern Afghanistan[1] is rather tradition-bound, within a social structure that may be termed »feudal« (i.e. a system basically characterized by concentration of a substantial part of the irrigated land in the hands of wealthy landowners who let their land to be cultivated by tenants and extract a certain amount of their labour as ground-rent in kind). The economic and social changes that do appear in Afghanistan, and particularly in and around Kabul, have had little or unnoticeable influence on the women's culture and daily life in the provinces. Insofar as women's emancipation can at all be mentioned in the country as a whole, it is confined to the upper classes in the most important cities, probably comprising approx. 2% of the women of Afghanistan.[2]

Social life in the area is characterized by a strict separation between the daily life of men and women. However, this separation does not in any way mean a thorough separation of the spheres of interest of the two sexes. On the contrary they cross-cut and interact in many respects.

For that reason it would be incorrect and inadequate to regard the woman's sphere as concentrated exclusively on »domestic« or »private« matters, all »public« or »political« activities being the privilege of men. Matters and events in the »private« sphere can be of crucial importance to men's public performance and their resources and possibilities of action in the local political life. This is closely related to the fact that within Pashtun society in Kunar the extended family, and the familial household, are the social and economic units. On one hand the household is the unit of ownership, production, and, to a large extent, consumption. On the other hand the individual's frame of reference, even in the larger social context, is at least ideologically drawn up on the basis of family and kinship, through blood and through marriage.